Swapping garden’s surplus bounty

Too many zukes and cukes? Exchange in Sebastopol offers outlet for gardeners with more produce than they can use.

Home gardener produce exchanges

It’s a dilemma known to anyone who has ever tried to grow edible plants in their backyard: There’s usually too much or not enough. From year to year, you often never know if you’ll have a feast of tomatoes or whether your carefully tended crop will fizzle.

But two Sebastopol women, Dena Allen and Carol Henderson, have figured out a way for home gardeners to easily swap their goods so no apple,
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squash, pear or cucumber need rot on the ground or wind up in the compost pile.

For three years, the Home Gardener Produce Exchange/Donation they started has allowed backyard growers to give and receive without spending a dime.

Twice a month, anyone in the community can bring their garden excess to the Sebastopol Grange on Highway 12. In turn, they can take whatever stirs their appetite from tables that, in the peak of the summer season, can be groaning with inviting produce.

No one is turned away.

“People trickle in and things come and go, and you never know what you’re going to find,” said Sil Yin, an enthusiastic home cook who lives in a nearby housing complex with no place to garden. But she enjoys the company of like-minded people, so she has joined the grange in solidarity.

On a recent Tuesday — the swap meet is held two Tuesdays a month from May through October — she still found plenty to catch her eye, including a box of San Marzano tomatoes and some intriguing little citrus.

Lawrence Jaffe brought the mystery fruit, which turned out to be calamansi, a cross between a kumquat and a citrus species from the Philippines. They are sour and popularly used in condiments, beverages, marinades and preserves.

Jaffe also brought his mandolin to play while people traded and talked, lending a folksy air to the event.

“I like seeing the camaraderie of seeing what people are doing. It’s another way to connect with people that’s not retail,” Jaffe said.
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He also brought Murcott oranges, a variety of juice mandarins. In the golden early evening light of late September, he “shopped” the tables, with an eye on some Asian pears and tomatoes. Last time, he tooted home rhubarb and lettuce, and he won’t pass up any chance at lemon cucumbers, which his daughter loves.

**Surprise offerings**

Over the course of the hour, the tables filled with bunches of grapes, zucchini, a potted salvia plant, even walnuts brought by Julian Blair, who never fails to show up with something from his Santa Rosa garden.

“I see some spaghetti squash there I’m really hankering for because mine didn’t produce as well. And there’s some weird citrus thing — I don’t even know what fruit that is,” he said about the calamansis that had everyone buzzing.

The exchange is the project of Allen and Henderson, who are hoping to start a larger movement in Sonoma County to prevent food waste in a region with such an abundance.

The two friends are working with the Sonoma County Food Recovery Coalition, a network of nonprofits, government agencies and individuals collaborating to promote food sharing through several programs and channels.

Allen, a member of the coalition, is happy to give advice to any group, from a neighborhood of home gardeners to community garden participants, on how to start a similar swap. And with cool-weather crops soon appearing, the model can be used virtually year-round, although the Sebastopol Exchange will run only through October.

According to the coalition, 45,500 tons of edible food winds up in the landfill each year.

“There is an underground movement of people who want to talk about gardening and want to share what they’re growing,” said Allen, who launched the exchange with Henderson in 2019.
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The swap starts at 5 p.m. and lasts 45 minutes. Anything left over at the end is taken to the food pantry at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, which also is home to a Seed Library that holds seed exchanges to promote home growing. Henderson works at the seed library.

Both are just further examples of the sharing economy that has taken hold in Sonoma County and around the country.

Henderson also brings little bouquets of flowers to the exchange.

“We often think of produce exchanges as just vegetables,” she said. “But we also need flowers to bring beauty to our lives, and having flowers in our gardens encourages the pollinators. Our gardens grow better when we grow more flowers.”

Beyond food sharing

Plant starts and seeds also show up at the exchange at the beginning of the season, giving people new things to try in their gardens. The swap is also a sharing of information.

“In a way, we receive more than we actually give, because we’re receiving information about new plants or we’re sharing gardening tips or just meeting new friends,” Henderson said.

Mary Dodgion said she was introduced this year to tomatillos thanks to the exchange.

“I’ve never used them before and now I just love them,” she said. “I have a green salsa recipe that someone gave me that called for tomatillos.”

For this swap, the Sebastopol woman had a lot to share: tomatoes, spaghetti squash, cucumbers, eggplant, some rosemary cuttings and rhubarb.

Allen said the exchange idea is critical at a time when there is so much hunger and yet so much waste of good food. Many people have far more
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growing in their gardens or on their trees than they can eat.

“This is a way to share the bounty of what we have,” Allen said. “But it’s also a community builder. We get to stand around and talk to other people who also are interested in growing food.”

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All photos by John Burgess/Press Democrat.

Mary Dodgion loads up the exchange table with boxes of tomatoes, eggplant, rhubarb and spaghetti squash.